Questions to Ask When Planning a Septic System

If you are planning a home that will use a septic system, now is the perfect time to ask questions that can head off costly modifications and repairs later:

- Is the system appropriately sized? The tank should be large enough to hold at least two days of waste flow—at least 1,000 gallons for a three-bedroom house with four occupants.
- Is the lot appropriate for a septic system? Not only should there be sufficient room for a septic tank, drainfield, and one replacement drainfield area, the site needs to be evaluated in terms of the following:
  - Topography—yards with ridges, knolls, and numerous slopes may not be suitable.
  - Soils—the soil has to have the capacity to accept and treat the volume of wastes anticipated.
  - Ground water—areas with high ground water may not be suitable
- What will it cost to add a second drainfield? State regulations require a reserve area for a future drainfield to use when the first drainfield reaches the end of its useful life; adding the replacement field during construction may only cost a fraction of what it would if added later. Plus, switching the drainfields annually assures that the resting drainfield is dry and ready to receive wastewater.

Additional Sources of Information

You can access additional information about septic systems from these Web sites:

Idaho Department of Environmental Quality:
http://www.deq.idaho.gov/water/prog_issues/waste_water/onsite_septic_systems.cfm

http://www.deq.idaho.gov/water/assist_citizen_comm/septic/septic_homeowners_guide.pdf

http://www.deq.idaho.gov/water/assist_business/septic/tech_manual_updates.cfm

http://adm.idaho.gov/adminrules/rules/idapa58/0103.pdf

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency:
http://cfpub.epa.gov/owm/septic/index.cfm

http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic/pubs/homeowner_guide_long.pdf

Idaho Health Districts. (The Health Districts permit septic systems in Idaho):
http://www2.state.id.us/phd1/

http://www.ncdhd.us/

http://www.publichealthidaho.com/default.asp

http://www.cdhd.idaho.gov/index.cfm

http://www.phd5.idaho.gov/

http://www.sdhdidaho.org/

http://www2.state.id.us/phd7/

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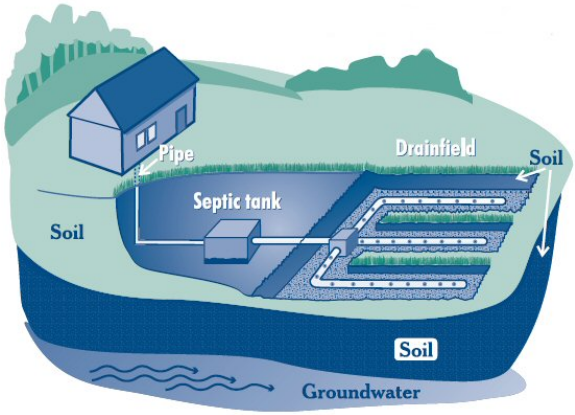
Septic Systems and Drainfields: What You Need to Know



For homeowners, real estate professionals, and developers

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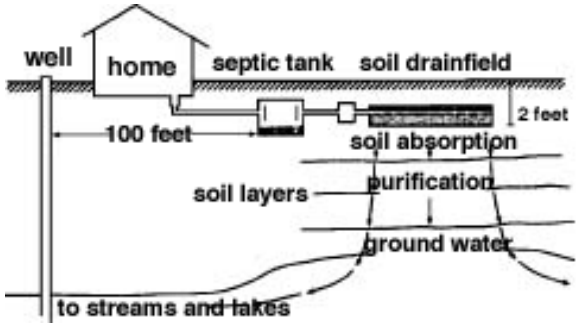
Boise, Idaho 83706
www.deq.idaho.gov

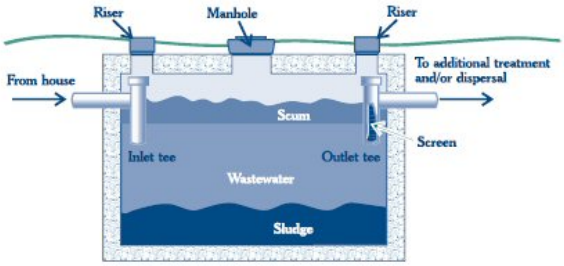
What is a Septic System?



Source: Michael P. Vogel , Montana State University, http://www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt9401.html

A septic system is a form of wastewater treatment commonly used in areas where connection to a municipal wastewater treatment system is not practical. The system consists of piping, a septic tank, a drainfield, and the soil.

The septic tank holds the wastewater long enough for solids to settle into a sludge at the bottom of the tank, while oils and greases float to the top, forming a scum. Bacteria in the tank consume a small amount of waste as nutrients.



Tank effluent flows to a drainfield. There, pipes below the surface distribute the wastewater, which percolates through the soil. Microorganisms in the soil ingest waste products, providing final treatment for the wastewater. The soil itself acts as an additional filter, adsorbing some wastes.

Caring for Your Septic System

Properly designed and constructed, your septic system can greatly reduce the environmental impacts of household wastewater, but proper operation of the system requires some routine maintenance and care:

- Have your septic system inspected by a qualified professional at least every three years—every year if your system has electrical components—and have the tank pumped when indicated.
- Use water efficiently. Excessive flows can overload the septic system, causing wastewater to back up into the house or yard:
  - Use the proper load size when washing clothes, and avoid doing all the laundry in one day.

  - Don't empty your hot tub into the septic system.
  - Consider replacing older toilets and inefficient showerheads with more efficient models.
- Do not flush materials that can clog your septic system, such as diapers, cat litter, cigarette filters, coffee grounds, feminine hygiene products, cotton swabs, dental floss, and paper towels.
- Do not pour toxic chemicals down the drain. Household chemicals, paints, gasoline, and pesticides can harm or kill the bacteria that digest and treat waste.

- Minimize using (or eliminate) your garbage disposal. Kitchen scraps significantly increase sludge and scum in your septic tank, requiring more frequent pumping. Compost these wastes instead.
- Dispose of old medicines, such as antibiotics in the trash; medicines may kill the bacteria if flushed, resulting in ground water contamination.

Giving Your Septic System More Life

The typical functioning life of a septic system is twenty years. Enhance the life of your system by doing the following:

- Add an effluent filter. An effluent filter, placed in the septic tank outlet baffle or tee prevents excess solids from flowing to and clogging the drainfield.
- Protect your system's drainfield. Plant only grass on top, never drive or park vehicles on the drainfield, and direct roof drains, basement sump pump flows, and other drainage systems away from the drainfield.